



Sermon Growth Guide

September 7, 2025

Vision Sunday

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

Key Verse: 1 Thessalonians 1:3 – “We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Big Idea: As we embody faith, love, and hope, we become a community that transforms the culture and shows Christ at the heart.

Foundations

Paul opens his letter to the Thessalonians with gratitude. He thanks God for a church whose faith, love, and hope are not abstract ideas but lived realities. He remembers their work produced by faith, labor prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:3). These three—faith, love, and hope—are the lifeblood of a healthy church, expressed openly in action.

Just as the church was the heart of Thessalonica, we believe the church is the heart of Colorado Springs. A city has schools to train the mind, hospitals to heal the body, and government to lead, but the church is its heart. The heart defines what we love and value, where we turn for comfort, and what passions drive us forward.

As a congregation, we are stepping into a new chapter. In recent years we have worked hard to grow healthier as a staff and as a body, and God has been faithful. Yet the true test of our life together is not structures or scores but whether faith, love, and hope are visibly at work in us.

When we live this way, our city notices. Faith in action, love in labor, and hope in endurance become a testimony to the living Christ and show that the church is the heart of the city.

Understanding God’s Word

Paul remembers the Thessalonians for a faith that produced work, a love that prompted labor, and a hope in Christ that gave endurance. These qualities were not hidden but visible, shaping the life of their community. As we reflect on this passage, how do we see faith, love, and hope actively at work among us, and how might they define our church as the heart of the city?

Applying God’s Word

Paul’s words remind us that faith, love, and hope are not just inward attitudes but outward realities that shape the life of the church. When we choose to live God’s way, the Spirit transforms us, and that transformation becomes visible to others. Our work, our love, and our endurance are how the gospel takes root in a city. What step might God be asking you to take so that faith, love, and hope become more evident in your daily life?

Witnessing God’s Word

The Thessalonians’ faith, love, and hope became a witness far beyond their own city. Others heard of their endurance in Christ and were drawn to turn from idols and follow the living God. In the same way, our life together is meant to be seen. When we embody faith that works, love that serves, and hope that endures, we point others to Jesus and invite our city to find life in Him.

Does a city have a heart? Think about the various functions of a city like Colorado Springs. City Hall is our executive function. The schools are the mind—always growing, always learning. The police and military are the muscular system, hospitals are the immune system, protecting us and healing us. But where is the heart? I say it's right here. The Church is the heart of the city, defining what we love and care about, where we turn to help and comfort, what we value and pursue—our passions. The Church defines the heart of the city. "We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thessalonians 1:3) The church was the heart of Thessalonica. Our church defines the heart of Colorado Springs, and it is time for us to move forward in ministry. Today's message is a little different. We do a kitchen table discussion each year so everyone can know what's going on. Welcome to Vision Sunday.

For the last few years, I have stood up at meetings like this and basically pushed pause. If you have been here for that time, you have heard me name some hard things about our life together as a church. I have gotten up at Vision Sundays, Annual Meetings and Town Halls and said openly that there was a problem in the core that we needed to fix and that until we did, we should not push hard into new ministries or opportunities. That problem? First Pres is a hard place to work; the staff is hurting and that hinders ministry. Pause. Time to get healthy. Three years ago, we launched a total reorg of our staff and Session structures. It was time to dismantle the old and begin anew. We needed to form a unified, healthy structure to match our vision to be Light and Life for the City. Session was restored to the classic Presbyterian model, one body of Elders in governance supported by Ministry Teams (committees) of Elders, Members and Staff working side by side in perfect harmony, or something. The Staff Org Chart was

reconfigured to unite all staff members into one team under the leadership of one Executive Pastor, Chief of Staff. Not a single job description or a single decision-making body was left untouched. I wanted to be able to say, "First Pres is able to Recruit, Train and Empower a Healthy, Motivated and Aligned Team to support this mission." Change is hard and can be disruptive, but it is working better and better.

Two years ago, we asked Best Christian Workplaces to get involved to give an objective measure on the state of our staff culture. In 2023 we took our first Best Christian Workplaces Index, an anonymous survey to gauge staff engagement. We scored 3.51 out of 5. That may not sound too bad, but it placed us at the very bottom of the pile for churches. We finally had objective evidence of what we all knew: things needed to change. After one year of trainings and interventions, new patterns to create a new culture, we scored 3.53 in 2024. Consultants told us not to be discouraged. This is culture change. Most churches take two and a half years to notice significant differences. We kept at it, doing a lot of hard work as a staff, awkward conversations and open forums, prayers and spiritual practices. A church is listed as a Best Christian Workplace if the score is over 4.0. I promised we would be there by 2027, but honestly wondered if we would ever see it.

Last month we took our third Best Christian Workplaces Index. After two years of hard work, difficult change, and steady culture shift, I am truly delighted to report that our Staff scored at 4.14 and First Pres Colorado Springs is now listed on the registry of Best Christian Workplaces! Praise God. It was hard to get here. There is still more to do and we will continue to cultivate and defend this new health. The best part is how it feels to come to work. This is truly a different place and a new chapter. Thank you, church, for praying and working, changing and trusting, being patient and understanding while we got this part of our house in order.

What now? Well, along the way we needed room for the congregation to express what we were all feeling. A year ago, we launched First Pres Forward and held dozens of town halls and meetings. We heard what you were feeling so we could hear where Jesus is calling. First Pres Forward consolidated 18 action items under five initiatives. Here is an update on where we are so far. You can follow along with all of this at firstprescos.org/forward.

Initiative One: Facilitate Healing and Reconciliation. The first action point is “Hire or designate a “staff chaplain” to provide support and care for employees as needed.” Dr. John Goodale has pivoted to that role as he moves toward retirement, and we will continue that position after. Finished. “Collect and share stories of reconciliation, healing and transformation to normalize this culture.” Caring Ministries and Communications are actively pursuing this goal. In Progress. “Establish moral and ethical standards of extending grace, kindness, honor and accountability for both staff and congregation.” The Best Christian Workplaces Index tells us we have made great strides here. More to go. In Progress. “Conduct services of lament and forgiveness when needed to seek reconciliation and health.” On July 30 we held an all-day Staff and Session Retreat culminating in a service of lament, gratitude and recommitment. It was moving. We have a lament service scheduled for all who wish to participate on November 19 with more such services planned on 6-month increments. This is an ongoing part of life together, so it will never be done, but the practice has been established. In Progress.

Initiative Two: Inspire Deep Discipleship. “Train and equip people for effective evangelism and discipleship.” This is ongoing. Discipleship and Family Ministries Teams have ownership of this continuing task and are moving forward. In Progress. “Commission people regularly in worship services to remind us that we are a sent

people.” It’s happening. Finished. “Create a Missions Hub at First Pres to celebrate partnerships and invite people into service.” It is under design, but a long way to go. Started. “Build mentoring relationships which connect generations in spiritual growth.” New proposals are being developed. Started. “Extend compassion and hospitality to people in need by embracing our city with Christ’s love.” And “Develop people to become holistic and authentic worshippers who live out being Light + Life.” These are ongoing missions of First Pres. Started and In Progress. I’m not sure they will ever be finished, but there is new activity in each.

The Third Initiative is Enhance Connectedness and Belonging. “Develop and host regular events to bolster Christian community, unity and relationships.” The Church Picnic was one. Our sermon series Belong was a direct effort. More to come. In Progress. “Evaluate and implement a comprehensive and effective communications plan for First Pres to reach all generational groups.” Finished. Comms has it.

Fourth is Improve Operational Systems. “Improve performance and effectiveness evaluations for staff and ministries.” Systems are developing. In Progress. “Implement an improved employee hiring, onboarding and training process.” HR has it. Finished. “Develop and implement a clear system of decision-making authority and operating procedures.” A Sustainable Strategy portfolio is in a three-ring binder on every desk and workstation outlining who has authority to do what and why. Finished. “Establish standard and recurring procedures for ministries and events to eliminate confusion and redundancy.” This is ongoing in every department. In Progress.

Finally, Improve Places, Spaces and Schedules. “Evaluate worship service times and formats to enhance participation and remove barriers.” Worship

Team has appointed a task force to create a new Sunday morning schedule. Started. “Evaluate and implement necessary facilities changes to improve accessibility, increase community, and cultivate discipleship.” Underway. In Progress. In all, five of eighteen initiatives are accomplished and in place. The other thirteen are underway, with a few of those being lifetime endeavors. We are moving forward, church.

What will the coming year hold? The Executive Pastor Nominating Committee is underway and making good progress. We have a number of solid candidates in meaningful conversations of discernment. Dr. Mateen Ellass and Dr. Jeff McRory are running our Discipleship ministries on an interim basis this year and I think we will be ready to hire a new Discipleship Pastor next year. We have welcomed our seventh class of First Pres Fellows and we have seen the fruit of this program seeding Young Adults ministry in Colorado Springs. We are invested in cultivating warm Christian community, evidenced in our new spaces The Commons and The Landing where it is easy to grow relationships. We are designing an open-air library to make those wonderful resources available. For me, the people I admire the most offer leadership to multiple enterprises. I’ve been asked to help Taylor University launch a Preaching Initiative. We are using this pulpit as a model for faithful preaching, inspiring the next generation of preachers. Missions engagement is rising. The Aquaponic Farm is opening in Southeast. A new international partnership is emerging for youth connection to global ministry. Lots of great things are happening.

What will we be known for in this next chapter? The church is the heart of the city. Can we dream a little? The Session and I are just beginning to dream about a few things. Pray for these. How about our relationship with Springs Rescue Mission? Some city in America is the best city at helping people out of dehumanizing homelessness. Why not us? We used to help SRM in their social

enterprise efforts through Good Samaritan Coffee and Mission Catering. Could we do that again? How about mental health, particularly for youth? Does First Pres have a calling here? What if we were able to open a Christian Counseling Center right here, and help platform suicide prevention efforts? These and other dreams are causing us to reconsider Café 225. Is it really time to knock that down or could we recover that building and find a new chapter of ministry? We will see. Anything is possible.

But I want you to walk away with this today: we are a Best Christian Workplace. First Pres Colorado Springs is listed on a national registry, on the basis of an objective and anonymous survey, as one of those churches in our times that knows how to care for its staff. Are you ready to live into that new song? The story changes. It’s a new day. I want you to know that and celebrate it. What we were in the past we are no longer. Our consultant said to the Staff, “this is nothing less than a culture shift.” It’s a new day. Praise God. There is no limit to what we can do when we are united in purpose to serve the Lord together. “We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thessalonians 1:3) It’s time to be the heart of the city, filling this town with the Light and Life of Jesus.